



## How the British king's private couriers led to our universal postal network



Top left: King Charles I  
Top right: Brian Tuke, the first postmaster  
Above: A penny black

**L**ong before the U.S. Post Office united a young America, England's Royal Mail was showing how mail delivery is done. Marking Royal Mail's 500th anniversary in 2016, a temporary exhibit at the National Postal Museum in Washington, DC, documented the Royal Mail's role as the world's first public postal system.

The birth of the Royal Mail strengthened the United Kingdom as the kingdom expanded and modernized. The Royal Mail later gave the American colonies a model for their own unity efforts with the founding of our own postal system in 1775. But Royal Mail's origins can be traced to a simple courier service reserved for the king and nobles.

A royal decree displayed in the exhibit marks the official founding of the Royal Mail as a private messenger service for the king. Issued in 1516 by King Henry VIII, the decree named one of Henry's clerks, Brian Tuke, as a knight and as "Governor of the King's Posts." Sir Brian established a network of roads and carriers to send decrees and writs from Henry throughout his realm, and to bring news and information back to London.

The Royal Mail became an important tool for the central government to keep control of its expanding kingdom. When James VII of Scotland became king of England in 1603, uniting the two countries under one ruler, one of his first acts after moving his court to London was to establish a postal road





Left: The United States Postal Museum



King Henry VIII

between his new home city and Edinburgh, capital of Scotland.

The system was first opened to the public not for the greater good but to make some extra money for the crown. James' son, King Charles I, entangled the country in expensive foreign wars, but his relationship with Parliament was so poor that he couldn't get new taxes enacted to finance the wars. (The relationship later declined further—Parliamentary leaders eventually overthrew Charles and had him beheaded.) To establish a new source of revenue, Charles opened the Royal Mail to public use. Postage would be paid by the recipient of the letter.

Charles appointed Thomas Witherings as postmaster, ordering him “to goe thither, and come backe againe in five dayes” between London and Edinburgh, and to serve many other routes between London and other important cities. Under Witherings, the newly public Royal Mail expanded to serve large parts of England and Scotland. Witherings built additional post roads and established “post houses.” Letters were carried between posts by carriers on horseback and delivered to local postmasters for distribution. They also were carried from a network of inns on foot and by horse, wagon or ship.

A 1637 book, *The Carriers' Cosmography*, lists hundreds of inns in London where carriers delivered and picked up mail, their destinations and the days they were available at each inn. The author, John Taylor, wrote that he often used a few beers to get his information from carriers who feared he was a tax collector. His alphabetical list of inns served by mail carriers filled many pages, but Taylor warned the information may be incomplete: “Reader if thou beest pleased, I am satisfied; if thou beest angry, I care not for it.”

The connection between inns and mail carriers persisted. The Royal Mail introduced the first official letter carrier's uniform in

1793—with the purpose of flagging carriers who were “loitering and mis-spending their time in Ale Houses.”

By the 19th century, the industrial revolution caused millions to move from small villages to big cities to work in factories that imported raw materials and exported their products, making communication by mail a useful tool for business and the masses alike. At the same time, public education was expanding the number of people able to read and write letters.

But payment for delivery was still often based on the number of sheets of paper or distance, and paid by the recipient—who might be unable to afford to accept it. Some senders even wrote coded messages on the envelope that a recipient could quickly read before refusing to accept it and pay for delivery, thereby enjoying delivery of the message for free.

The increase in mail volume required a simpler, standardized way to pay for it. One of the pioneers of education reform who had pushed to teach commoners to read and write also conceived of a simpler way to allow them to use the mail: the postage stamp.

Education reformer Rowland Hill proposed replacing the complex payment-on-delivery system with prepaid, low-cost stamps. In 1840, the Royal Mail introduced the “penny black,” a dark-colored one-cent stamp featuring a profile of Queen Victoria—a humble innovation that launched the modern pre-paid postage system still in worldwide use today.

*The United States Postal Museum in Washington, DC, was established by a joint agreement between the Smithsonian Institution and the U.S. Postal Service with exhibits about the history of the Post Office and how mail is delivered today. It opened in 1993. The museum is open 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. every day except Dec. 25. Admission is free. PR*

The proclamation by Charles I that opened the Royal Mail to the public

